

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 001786

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARP
INFO NSC FOR ABRAMS, DOD/OSD FOR SCHENKER AND MATHENY
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/25/2010

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)

SUBJECT: MEETING WITH AL JAZEERA QUALITY ASSURANCE CHIEF

REF: DOHA 1593

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, Reasons 1.4 (b&d)

11. (C) Summary: PAO met 10/26 with Jaafar Abbas Ahmed, the head of Al Jazeera's Quality Assurance unit. Abbas spoke frankly of the difficulties the unit faces in encouraging the professionalization of Al Jazeera, including resistance and hostility from AJ's older generation of journalists. He said progress has been made, however, and described AJ Managing Director Wadah Khanfar as "a source of strength." End summary.

12. (C) Jaafar Abbas Ahmed, the head of Al Jazeera's Quality Assurance (QA) unit, is a Sudanese national with long experience as a journalist, including work as a BBC reporter. He told PAO he was blacklisted by Sudan for 15 years as a result of a report on Sudan for the BBC. He began working part-time with Al Jazeera at its inception in 1996 and set up the channel's QA unit in August 2004. He now works full time as the head of the QA unit, which is located in a villa in Doha's West Bay area, across town from the AJ TV studios. Abbas said the separation is intended to underline and safeguard the unit's independence. Abbas also writes newspaper columns for publications in Saudi Arabia, London, Sudan and Qatar. He said his column was recently banned in Sudan for six months but was reinstated a couple of weeks ago.

13. (C) According to Abbas, the effort to professionalize Al Jazeera is an uphill one and that although progress has been made, "we still have a long way to go." The seven-member QA staff monitor the AJ TV channel 24 hours a day, with focus on news broadcasts and talk shows. Overview of the AJ website is also in their purview but is not carried out systematically due to limited staff resources. ("Sometimes we do a random inspection of the website, and we find all the rules have been completely ignored," he observed ruefully.)

15. (C) Abbas said the first step undertaken by the QA unit after its founding in late 2004 was the promulgation of the Al Jazeera codes of conduct and ethics. Workshops were held for the Al Jazeera staff to introduce and explain the new codes; since then, the QA unit has been monitoring the channel's performance in light of these codes. Abbas attends the weekly editorial meetings and gives his input to senior editors and producers "bluntly, to their faces," he said. The QA unit also issues daily reports by email on the day's programming, and when a big event happens, the QA unit will record BBC and CNN coverage of the same event and compare it critically to AJ's coverage.

16. (C) He noted that his unit met with significant resistance initially and were known informally among AJ staff as the KGB, the CIA, the FBI or ("the best one", said Abbas, laughing) the Expediency Discernment Council of the System (Note: The Iranian government watchdog committee headed by former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani. End note.) "Things have improved now," he said. "People are becoming wary of our criticism. We have producers, senior producers, coming over here to discuss our reports with us. We are like a tumor -- a benign one -- that people are learning to live with," he said, grinning. However, hostility still remains, he said, and there are some AJ journalists who even now will not return a casual greeting in the corridors.

17. (C) The chief obstacle in professionalizing the channel is that "old habits die hard," said Abbas. He estimated that the AJ staff under his purview (all those who bear the title "journalist", which include correspondents, reporters, stringers, editors and producers) number not more than 200. While AJ started out with a significant number of ex-BBC reporters, this cadre has shrunk over the years, attracted to other channels such as Al Arabiyya, Abbas said. He added that only a handful remains. A majority of the remaining journalism staff are therefore ex-state TV reporters. They may be brilliant, but the journalistic culture they have absorbed is different from the one AJ is trying to cultivate, Abbas explained. There is, for example, a cultural tendency towards verbosity among Arabs, among whom rhetoric is a cherished and respected art. This tendency clashes with standard journalistic practice, which encourages reporters to avoid adjectives: If a particular event is "horrific", don't

say so but let pictures and statistics show that to your audience, he said.

18. (C) Abbas said that in his view there has been a definite improvement in Al Jazeera's overall performance since the QA's inception fourteen months ago. He said the newer, younger reporters with less experience respond very well to the AJ environment. The problem is with the older, more experienced journalists. The QA unit has had more of an impact on AJ's news broadcasts than it has had on the AJ talk shows, which are the domain of AJ's more experienced journalists. "Each of them thinks they are Oprah Winfrey. They think they don't need guidance," he said, rolling his eyes.

19. (C) "We at Al Jazeera need to develop our own style," he said, pointing at a thick printout of the BBC's new style guide lying on his desk. "There is an overlap between code of conduct and style." For example, scenes of violence. How should AJ air them? Close up? Or only using long shots? "What seems gross in the US might not seem gross to an Arab viewer," he said. "And we are an Arab channel, we focus on what is of interest to the Arab viewer. The Arab viewer wants to see on screen proof of Israeli brutality, so it is OK to show a dead Palestinian child, for example," he said. "If you don't show these things, then they think you are participating in the cover-up."

110. (C) Abbas also talked about the controversy over the use of the word "martyr" and the verbs associated with it. Current AJ guidance says the word may only be used in association with events in Palestine and nowhere else, he said. He described how AJ sent an admonitory fax two days ago to the AJ bureau chief in Beirut who interspersed his report on the release of the Mehliis report with mentions of the "martyr" Rafik Al Hariri. Many in Al Jazeera think it is a mistake to allow the use of the word at all, even in connection with Palestinians, but that is an emotionally charged topic in the Arab world and one it is too late to walk back, said Abbas.

111. (C) He said the QA unit is developing a computer system that will allow them to access with one click the record of every AJ journalist: How many times he has made biased remarks; what are his repeated mistakes; how many times he breached the code of conduct or ethics; and so on. "Then we will have a say in the performance appraisal of the employees, which affects allowances, annual increases, even promotions," Abbas said.

112. (C) The difficulties faced by the QA unit are many, but it has come to rely on AJ Managing Director Wadah Khanfar as "a source of strength," said Abbas. "He is behind us all the way."

UNTERMEYER